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The Engineer's Bookshelf . . .

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

Early one Sunday afternoon several weeks ago, after I had eaten a very late breakfast, I wandered into the auditorium of the Ohio State University Museum to see the pencil sketches taken from the note book of Professor Ralph Fanning of our Department of Fine Arts. I frankly admit that I had been lured to this exhibition by the announcement that I would see sketches of the French invasion country. And, sure enough, I was not disappointed. Many of the more picturesque points of interest were there, done in pencil with that artistic Fanning touch that I hope, by this time, is well known to you: a church at Rouen, the cathedral at Poitiers, a fine old corner house at Blois, the fountains at Versailles, Mont St. Michel towering in the mist, the Rue de la Paix at Lisieux, the Pont L'Eveque in Normandy, and a very fine sketch of the Boulevard de L'Opera from a window in the Hotel du Louvre in Paris.

To be sure these sketches were ones made in the invasion country during the peace years, 1919-1939. But from the couple scores of them arranged orderly in the walls of the auditorium, there was one that attracted my attention more than any other. It was hung in the far corner of the large room, and as I approached, I was drawn to it as if by magic. The sketch looked nostalgically familiar, and then as I drew nearer, I realized that I had been right. In the lower corner of the sketch, Mr. Fanning had printed these words in French: Evening. The Cathedral. Le Mans. August 28, 1922.

I slid rather unconsciously into a nearby chair, my eyes still fixed on the sketch. It was too good to be true, I thought, this walking through a museum and seeing a picture so very familiar. In the gelatin of my memory, I was back once again to the August of 1918, when as a member of Co. A, 308th Military Police, . . . number four man, rear rank, last squad, by the way . . . I had been billeted within the very shadow of that churchly edifice.

I recall so well, the day my outfit arrived in the city of Le Mans; although it seems as if it were only yesterday, I believe it was August 1, 1918, when, with the other members of Co. A, I had been transported by means of French boxcar from the little village of Montigny in Haute-Marne, into Paris and then out, through Chartres, and finally had been disembarked at the city of Le Mans in the Department of Sarthe. It was a hot day . . . hot for northern-central France . . . but under full pack we marched away from the

station, up the tree-lined Avenue Thiers, across the Place de la Republic, and finally into a crooked, narrow, little street whose name I now forget leading down into the Place des Jacobins. There, before me, on that hot August afternoon towered the city's massive, thirteenth century cathedral, one of the most impressive in France, its spires lifted to God and its thick flying buttresses spreading out in fan-shape fashion. I'm not so sure that I appreciated my first glimpse of it on that August day some twenty-odd years ago; but I am sure that I learned to love the city and its cathedral and its people during the following eight months I was stationed there.

Then, while watching Mr. Fanning's sketch in the Museum that Sunday afternoon, with the shifting light as it poured in a tall west window, the liberal span of nearly a generation took place in my mind. Had Nazi domination in any way damaged the cathedral? Did the morning sun still stream gold in the Rose window of the east transept? Did the crenelated Porche du Cavalier still jut out at the west entrance? Did the soaring apse with its great nobility still dominate the skyline? And did the crooked, dirty stairs still lead down from the Rue Grande to the city's Scarlet Section? Did the Nazi carry away the pure white marble Venus which beckoned to shy unsuspecting soldiers at the door of number five Rue Lepic? Did the Occupation harm the cathedral, I asked myself?

Also what had happened in the Place de la Republic between June 1940 and August 1944? Five nights a week for more than two months, I recalled I had lead a platoon of enlisted American soldiers into the Place to stand retreat while thousands of civilians had gayly looked on, and while the Stars and Stripes had been lowered slowly down the high flag pole towering above the statue of General Chanzy. And the statue itself: Had the Nazi melted it into bullets? General Chanzy had commanded the Army of the Loire in 1871 and Sarthe natives dearly loved his statue. Do the Bourse in the Tribunal de Commerce and the Palais de Justice still stand? Is the church of the Visitation still graciously guarding the entrance from Rue Gambetta? And are the geraniums still red in the flower boxes outside the windows of the Hotel du Dauphin? Are the chairs still blue at the sidewalk tables of the Soyez and the Cafe de la Paix where we used to sip pink grenadines and watched the little dishes, each

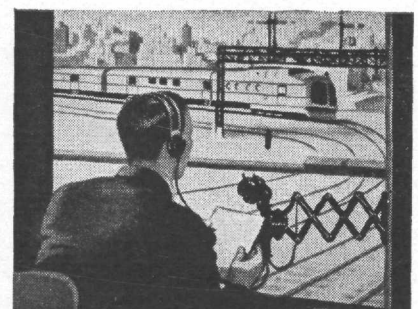
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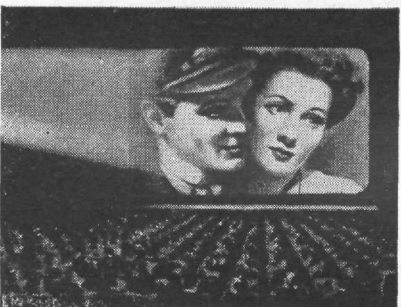
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marked cinquante centimes, pile up before us? Did Nazi Occupation harm the Place de la Republique, I asked myself?

And what has happened to the people of Le Mans? Do the stalwart peasants in their clacking sabots still wheel their wares to the market place at dawn on Wednesdays? Do they still come from their comfortable cottages at Arnage and La Suze, at Economy and at Laigne-en-Belin? Do the mademoiselles still strut and stride at the Promenade des Jacobins on Sunday evenings? What became of the little lad who went to the college at La Fleche? Are Madame Jouanneau's pommes-de-terre frites still as crisp as the autumn air? You see, I'm interested in the welfare of the people of Le Mans, because in 1918, they took unto their hearthstones lads like myself from Ohio. And good it is to remember them!

But even better it is to realize that in this very day, the people of Le Mans are once more looking after the welfare of another generation of American soldiers. No doubt, it is best, to sit in the cloistered walls of a museum and to recall the events of a day long past by merely seeing a pencil sketch of a thirteenth century cathedral. I'm deeply indebted to Mr. Fanning.

Several days after my visit to the museum, ladies and gentlemen, digging deep into the contents of an old trunk, I extracted from it a file of fading letters and several old notebooks containing my journals written during European trips since 1918. In one notebook under the date of August 10, 1922, I discovered that on my first trip back to France after the War, I had written this paragraph . . . and I quote:

"This morning I took a cab to L'Ecole pour Jeunes Filles where I was billeted in 1918. Curiously enough, when I entered the courtyard, I could recall vividly only one day; that was the day that my company fell in at regular formation only to be told by the captain that at dawn tomorrow we would entrain for Brest on the first leg of our homeward journey."

On the next page of the journal, ladies and gentlemen, I discovered these two short paragraphs . . . and I quote:

"What a thrill I had this morning when I walked into the little cafe of Madame Jouanneau and saw her and her husband, not one bit changed from when I left them in 1919. How pleased I am that they remembered me and how happy they were to sit down with me over a bottle of red wine that they trotted out immediately and to discuss those pleasant days in the Rue Grande. Madame

tells that Jaques died last summer as the result of the wounds he received on the Marne.

"But the little cafe is the same and I found the corner table where I had carved my name and where many times I had eaten her French fried potatoes. As I sit here now in this hotel room writing these words, the visit this morning seems to recall both those happy and unhappy war days when we knew not what the next dawn would bring forth."

Well, I am wondering, ladies and gentlemen, if on this October afternoon, 1944, that same Madame Jouanneau might not still be frying her famous potatoes for another generation of American soldiers; and I am wondering also if some Ohio boy might be sitting at that same corner table, reading my carved inscription: Sgt. W. R. D., Marion, Ohio, U. S. A.

This little excursion that I have taken you on today, is certainly not the France of the guide books, is it. I have not shown you the France of the tourist; I have shown you the France of the traveler. You see, I make a distinction between the two words. You may have guessed that I love France. I love the out-of-the-way places in France . . . the medieval town, the quaint village, the picturesque spot; I love all that goes to make up that friendly, smiling land of good cheer. And I am happy that on a Sunday afternoon not so long ago I was gently reminded of the France I love, when I saw Mr. Fanning's exquisite little sketch of the cathedral at Le Mans.